

Daddy's Girl

'Pure evil in the guise of a six year old.'



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DADDY'S GIRL
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Unveiled Sins Series

Toxic Loves

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*The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
are of equal duration.*

T.S. Eliot

At dawn, blackbirds and sparrows sing a love song to celebrate life from the top of the yew tree. The aubade is as sweet as Daddy's lullaby to a baby. When darkness falls, the sound of a lonely owl spills through its branches, settling in the shadows at the base of the trunk where it shouldn't travel any further.

The tree has its own song, too. It isn't the sound of the wind.

Clavicle. Femur. Metacarpal.

Small rainbow-coloured wooden and plastic beads adorn the yew tree's branches. A white scarf uncoils from its neck in the breeze, then it is snatched back possessively. Ancient Druids who once worshipped the tree are long gone; now nobody ever sees its visitor clearly, even when the sun is white hot and fiercely bright. Some might dare to admit they've seen a vague, shambling outline like a shadow, but most cannot be sure what it is.

A living monolith and an ancient gravestone, the oxymoron rises from the Shropshire landscape, ascending over thirty metres into the sky. Knots in its bark, sticky with sap at this time of year, blink and wink at its visitor. A ladybird takes off rapidly from the trunk as if in disgust, but the tree is steadfast; its roots drive into the soil like starving fingers with dirty fingernails, hungry for nourishment, until the swollen belly of earth on which it sits rises.

Scapula. Coccyx. Fibula.

A gust of breeze sends the long arms waving, reaching, swaying as if to steady the tree and keep its balance on the mound. Its dark-green needles shimmer but remain fixed, defying gravity. Five metres from the trunk, where the dark, fertile soil is peculiarly pungent, thick roots bulge like a mouth coming up for air.

It's funny, really. Skin bruises and tears easily, bones snap and splinter, but not living, growing wood. The rough bark runs from toe to neck like copper stitches in an intricate piece of embroidery, concealing what is within. Keeping it whole. A pulse throbs through its veins to the very tip of the tree, where a mammary cloud perches without a silver lining.

There's a smell of rain in the air. Once the drops start to fall, the stench of cold, wet earth is as sour as old sweat. Dust shifts and rises into the air, and a small figure appears.

Chapter One

Lennie tries to read the tight expression on his ex-girlfriend's face; it's not one he recalls seeing before and it scares him.

He'd heard nothing from Elly for years then the texts started arriving a few months back, crazy texts begging him to visit, pleading like she's scared of herself. Now she is standing in front of the door to her rented ground-floor flat. She is wearing jeans that are two sizes too big for her, and her once-glossy auburn hair hangs in straggly knots down her back like dead ivy.

When they were seeing each other, she said she liked his rat-tat-tat way of knocking on the front door. This time she was ready and waiting for him before he even raised his hand. 'You got my text then.'

Lennie nods, unsure how close to get to the woman whose green eyes are boring into him, whose plucked eyebrows are thin, uneven lines that resemble a broken blade from a handsaw.

Maybe it is late for him to visit a young child – that might explain Elly's trembling hands – but it took him hours to decide whether to act on her last text. *SOS. Rosie 6 today*, it read. She'd sent him a text once before asking for help then, before he could reply, sent a second one saying it was a joke. She'd signed it with an inane smiley face.

Lennie looks up at the darkening sky. The cloud above is a mammary cloud, he thinks, sensing that now isn't the time to share that knowledge. If Clare were here, he'd tell her like a shot.

He closes the car door, thinking he's made the right decision to leave Rosie's birthday present on the passenger seat for now. The next-door neighbour's dog jumps furiously at the fence, its barking interspersed with the sound of its body hitting the wood.

'Shut it, Dobber!' Elly yells.

Dobber takes no notice of being shouted at but when a child's face appears at the window he immediately stops barking and whines like a scared thing.

'Rosie did the trick,' Lennie says, hoping to get a smile from Elly.

The child's small palms splay against the glass. Her features beneath a thin smattering of hair are pressed hard against it, her nose flat and her eyes appearing to bulge. He raises his eyebrows, surprised the kid isn't hurting herself.

Seeing Rosie for the first time on her sixth birthday is not something he's proud of, but it's what Elly wanted, what she'd insisted on. After an on-off relationship – more off than on – she'd fallen pregnant. The rift had started when she refused to stop drinking. Although she'd been fun to be with, he wasn't surprised or sorry when it was over. He is sorry now that he sees the conditions the child is living in.

Does she look like me?

It's hard to tell when she resembles a pug. He forces himself to look at Elly and is shocked by her emaciated body. Where is the athletic woman he'd enjoyed having sex with?

'How've you been?' he asks.

The moss on Elly's drive is so thick it could be seaweed. With his hands in his pockets, he scuffs at it with his trainer. The wheelie bin lid is an open mouth spewing takeaways and spare ribs.

'Living it up, as you can see.' Elly's arms hang loosely by her sides as if something has stretched them. 'I've not had a Friday night out getting slaughtered in six years. I miss paydays and drinks after work. You?'

'Is that why I'm here? Do you want your old job back?'

Elly shakes her head. 'No, I'm not up to that yet. Did you come to see her or me?' She yanks nervously at one of her thin eyebrows.

'I came because you asked me to. It was a shock after all these years. You sounded—' He doesn't know how to finish the sentence. There's a different aura about Elly, like she's got an itch she can't quite scratch. He looks at her hands. Some of her fingernails are long and twisty, others so short that the quicks are brutally red and sore. 'Is everything alright?'

Rosie bangs on the window, making Elly jump. Lennie gives the child a wave but she doesn't react. Her dark eyes are unblinking and trained solely on her mother.

'She's a handful,' Elly says, and rubs her arms like an icy breeze has found her. 'Probably wants to breastfeed again, though she's sucked me dry.'

Lennie frowns. 'Breastfeed?'

Elly moves closer to him, so close he can smell her sweat and stale breath and see the red veins in her eyes, tiny forks of lightning. She has a recent scar, a half-moon, above her left cheek. She used to be fit, healthy looking. He watches her scratch her arm where there is a tattoo of black tongues wrapped around her wrist.

‘You missed me?’ she says, her head at an odd angle like a dog waiting to be petted.

Awareness of Rosie, alone inside the flat, her face the hue of poison hemlock, registers in his head in a throbbing beat. *My kid. Shit, I’ve got a kid.*

The kid thumps the glass again as if to confirm she is real and won’t be ignored.

‘Sure, I missed us at first. I only kept away because that’s what you wanted, remember? I’ve driven past and thought about calling in, but you made it clear when Rosie was born that you wanted nothing to do with me.’

‘Yeah, well, I was confused back then. Are you seeing anyone?’

‘I’m with Clare Jordan now. I met her at the squash club.’ He hesitates. ‘Is Rosie mine?’

Elly reaches for Lennie’s hand but, sensing his discomfort, doesn’t touch him. ‘You look happy. Lost weight, too. Come in, anyways. We can talk.’

Lennie knows there’s something off about this scene. The car keys are in his pocket and there’s a road that will take him straight to Clare’s place and away from this mess in less than fifteen minutes. Then he flinches when he hears Rosie crying. Her mouth is open wide against the window, and the big yellow beads she’s wearing around her little neck catch his eye. Elly doesn’t seem to hear the sounds of distress, so he wills his legs to move.

Inside the flat, he catches a smell of urine and something like antiseptic that lodges at the back of his throat.

‘Do you want a drink? I’ve got beer,’ Elly says.

‘Better not.’

‘You always were bloody sensible.’

‘One of us had to be. You used to be house-proud,’ Lennie says. He looks around the sitting room which is as he remembers it – except for the mess.

Elly's mouth puckers. 'Yeah, well, that was before *her*,' she says. 'Bet you've got a vegetable patch? Wash your car every Sunday? A house that's spick and span?' As soon as she sits down on the sofa, Rosie climbs onto her knee.

'I like my routines, if that's what you're getting at.'

'I'm only messing. Have you got kids?'

He shakes his head and smiles at Rosie. 'I'm Lennie.' He casts around, trying to think of something to say. 'I like your shoes.' Rosie stares. 'What's your favourite colour?'

'Brown! Brown! Brown!'

'Oh, that's good. Me too. The colour of chocolate! How do you like school, Rosie?'

Rosie's mouth opens wide as if to yawn, but instead she wipes the edges of her mouth with her tongue and pulls the sides up into a crooked smile. She's a strange-looking child with a large face and small body. Her complexion is very pale, as if she's lived her whole life underground. Wearing her mother's chunky beads and an expression of disdain, she could be six or sixteen. She kicks off her shoes and socks, and yanks down Elly's top and bra and screws her mouth onto the large sore nipple. Elly grimaces and closes her eyes while Rosie wiggles her pink toes.

Lennie looks at his scuffed shoes.

Elly eventually opens her eyes. She winces as she pulls the child off her breast. 'She won't go to school.'

Elly never used to take any crap when he knew her so it's a surprise to hear that.

Suddenly the child speaks. 'My name is Rosie,' she says confidently, like he wants her autograph, like she's famous and he's some annoying groupie who's come to visit her. Milk dribbles from the side of her mouth.

Lennie raises his eyebrows. As far as he can see she looks nothing like him, which is a relief though it's not conclusive. 'I know. Rosie. That's a pretty name.' He could say 'that's a pretty name for a pretty face,' except it's not. It really isn't, especially with a trail of milk leaking out of the left side of her mouth like she's been propping up a bar for too long. The kid turns her back on him.

'Where are you working now?' Elly asks, pushing Rosie's head to one side so she can see Lennie.

‘Still at Nando’s restaurant, managing the place as best I can with staff coming and going. Ian, who took over from you, left in January.’

‘How come?’

‘He’s gone to Midsummer for a fraction more money. We’ve got someone new for the peak season in August. She was at Pizza Hut. Gail’s still waiting on in the restaurant, though I expect you already know that. Are you working?’

Elly shakes her head morosely. ‘Work doesn’t pay enough for childcare.’

‘Rosie, your mum’s a superb cook. Have you tried her omelettes?’

‘It’s my milk, or meat. Nothing else – except cookies,’ Elly says, readjusting her bra and top.

‘Go now!’ Rosie says to Lennie and points to the door.

Lennie laughs. ‘You like your mummy all to yourself, do you?’

Rosie remains perfectly still on her mother’s lap, guarding Elly’s breasts like a pit bull. To his surprise, Elly doesn’t say a word. Surely she’s going to tell the kid not to be so rude? That, and maybe ask him for a loan. By the state of her and the flat, she could use it. He’d readily loan her a few quid because, at heart, she’s a good, decent person who is having a tough time at the moment.

‘Go! Now!’ Rosie repeats. Her mouth opens wide and he sees she has a black spot on her tongue, a birthmark.

Now that they’re in touch, he should tell Clare that he might be Rosie’s father, though he wants to get a DNA test done first. Elly texted him shortly after Rosie was born to say that his name was on the birth certificate. He sent her some cash and a brief note, but heard nothing afterwards. A few months later he rang her but she didn’t pick up.

If he’s honest, it suited him to assume he wasn’t Rosie’s real dad. Before, the kid didn’t exist; now, here she is in the pale flesh, staring at him with the darkest eyes.

‘He’s your dad,’ Elly says plainly, like she’s placing an order for a cheeseburger and fries. ‘Say “Daddy”.’

‘Man!’ Rosie exclaims. ‘Man! Man! Man! I said I wanted Daddy on my birthday! Not man!’

‘I’ve brought something for your birthday, Rosie.’ Lennie lowers his voice, realising he’s almost shouting after Rosie’s outburst which is ringing in his ears. ‘It’s in the car. I’ll get it. Back in a sec.’

He doesn’t rush. The air outside feels fresh and the sky is a vast space after the confinement of the small, untidy flat. By the time he returns with Rosie’s present, the front door is locked and the curtains are closed.

‘Elly! Open up! What are you playing at? I thought you wanted me here.’ Lennie bangs, shouts, waits, sighs. He imagines Rosie being held out of view somewhere, perhaps being roughly pinned down by her mum. He can’t bear the thought that he might cause her pain by being here, so he places the birthday present – a soft doll with wide eyes and ginger hair – by the front door. When he stands up too quickly, the world spins.

‘Elly, that’s out of order,’ he says, one hand resting on the porch. ‘I came here because you asked me to. Do you need money?’ He bangs on the door again. ‘Is she mine or not? I’ll stay if you—’

He looks through the letter box and slaps it several times. ‘Rosie, are you alright?’ he calls.

Minutes pass without sound or movement from within. Frustrated, he kicks at the step. He hears a door slam inside the house. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake.’

His eyes follow the pylons that stretch up and beyond the austere block of flats into the distance. He wants Clare, the comfort of her in the small of his back as they lie in bed, her muscular body wrapped around his, hard and soft in all the right places. He shouldn’t have come here.

Lennie jumps into his car, grips the steering wheel then rams the gearstick into reverse. The Fiesta screeches out of the drive into the lane. He is breathing hard and fast, hating himself for wanting to speed away but doing it anyway. He’s forgotten to put his seat belt on. There’s just his empty rear-view mirror, the changing scenery and his racing heartbeat, but he’s a dad now. Or he probably is.

One thing is for certain: Rosie exists. And she’s...

What?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I don’t know.

What's Elly playing at? The half-moon scar, the yellow beads, the damn dog barking, being locked out but hearing a door slam shut inside. It all plays at high speed through his mind as he continues to accelerate. Elly's aura. Something off.

He grabs a cigarette too roughly from the packet on the passenger seat and it snaps in half.

'Shit.'

He needs a drag on a fag right now, so he reaches for another one just as he speeds up. Then he slows down at the bend, sending the packet and his phone into the footwell.

'Bollocks.'

He sent Elly money, heard nothing from her. Why get in touch now, when the kid is six? Should he contact social services?

Elly looked like shit, jumpy and twitchy like a sheep with maggots tickling under its fleece. He's glad to be in his clean car with the grass and hedgerows passing at speed. His accelerator foot is hungry to be away.

Lennie will never know any more about Elly and Rosie and the doll he gave her for her birthday because a mile down the road his black Fiesta collides with a yew tree more than twenty times his and Rosie's age put together. The car lies on its side, two of its tyres feeling for road and finding only air. The glinting silver hubcaps roll like eyes at the quiet opening of Lennie's flesh.

Within the tangle of metal there are discernible objects – a twisted car door, a packet of cigarettes, a smashed iPhone. They add reality to an otherwise anonymous collision between a car and a deadly tree.

It is July and the hedgerows are prickly green. The cheerful yellow dandelions are doused in petrol and urine and the daisies are wilting. The canopy of the yew tree provides shelter for the wreckage. Its flaking, reddish-brown bark has seen death before and does not flinch. Under the chassis of the Fiesta, broken stems of nettles and scarred campion make a grave for an open packet of Marlboros.

Bird song ceases and bumblebees keep still as if they are afraid. There is no movement except for the midges around Lennie's open wounds. After a while, flies crawl over the tree's gnarled roots and onto Lennie's face. He looks terribly surprised that his life is over so soon;

he has an expression that says, 'What's the punch line? Did I miss it when I was scrabbling around for a fag? No? Well fuck me, it's all over and I wasn't ready.' That's the look.

It doesn't matter whether Lennie was ready or not. That's just how it is.